

# *Selfish or Selfless*

*Fifth Sunday in Lent*

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This story is a familiar one to us as it is found also in Matthew and Mark and so we can be most familiar with it. Jesus describes the actions of this woman identified elsewhere as Mary as an action designed to prepare him for his burial. Clearly in Jesus eyes this event was imminent although this seems to have washed right over the disciples. Jesus is absolutely certain of what would be happening to him (and what it would achieve). In fairness to the disciples, things probably seemed to be travelling pretty much as they always had been, and the vague teachings about the suffering messiah probably seemed to be something that was way off in the future.

Now Mary acted – she had a special perfume – pure nard. Nard is a fragrance made from the spike or stamens of a species of Valerian root it smells like spicy musk. It takes 6 tons of the rare Valerian stamen to produce an 8 oz alabaster container of essential oil! It represents a whole year of hard work in the hot sun a full year's wages. Today's value is the same as a pound of gold! 8 ounces of spike nard essential oil would make 10 thousand bottles of old spice Cologne that smells like spike nard.

It would have possibly been the only object of great value that Mary owned. Perhaps it was an investment for her future perhaps passed down from the family as an insurance against hard times.

We can only speculate on exactly why she acted, Mary had sat at Jesus feet while Martha slaved in the kitchen. She had a connection to Jesus in some spiritual way, and had been complemented on choosing the better path. She wanted to get close to Jesus and had responded to him with a mixture of devotion and love. In this framework, she was determined to connect with him. In his self-sufficient way, nothing seemed need, but she took what was most precious and offered it to him with great extravagance. It showed the value she was placing on our Lord and in the same way, the response was tied with the events that would follow. Nard was one of the perfumes used in the burial right and had in its use, the declaration of love.

Contrast this with Judas. Motivated by his own needs, he reacts to this generous gift with anger. Of course, he did not say that he needed the money in the common purse so he could help himself, he dresses it up nicely. We could have helped the poor he says. And admirable and godly task. A wonderful diversion and self-justification that would not draw things back to him, but John notes that this is actually self-interest. A total contrast to the selfless act of Mary. How often do people dress up their own self-interest in spiritual terms that are little more than blatant attempts to get their own way. Although we tend to divide our Anglican Communion into Catholics and Evangelicals, the real division is between those who respond like Judas, and those who respond like Mary.

We are in a debate in this church about appropriate forms of worship and it seems that every one has an opinion. And if they don't share it with me, they share it with others to attempt to sway them to their own opinion. I am aware of the mutterings.

Everyone has a right to their own opinion, that is not the point, but are we motivated by love or self-interest. I engage daily with the world through my outside activities and I mix with people who are finding life difficult. From the family of the tradesman sub-contractor who isn't being paid on time, to families broken by domestic violence or perhaps even the simple breakdown that occurs when the wrong people have married. I see children who are bullied at school, because of disability or dysfunction or individuality. I see parents struggling with challenging kids and aging relatives with declining health. And the question that I come to is how do we speak to them as the body of Christ. Mary was generous with her resources and was commended for it, Judas want to keep what they had – ultimately for himself.

We need to step back from saying – this is the time I want and the style of worship I want and I like Judas won't be happy until I see things happen in my way. Unless we are asking about reaching the world, then we are asking the wrong question. Self interest or selfless giving are the two alternatives shown here. We may make the choice. Mary gave the best she had – the most precious thing she had. Are we prepared to do the same?

**AMEN**